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ABSTRACT

This speech emphasizes the need of all types of academic institutions, to maintain a freedom of choice in higher education that will preserve a vigorous system of independent higher education. Without it, pluralism in any true sense is impossible, and without pluralism in higher education, freedom of choice is without meaning. (Author/MJM)

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PLURALISM IN EDUCATION: THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

National Council of Independent Junior Colleges
Quality Inn, Arlington, Virginia
October 29, 1973

I stand before you today with at least three convictions which I'm willing to share with you. First I'm convinced that you hope, as I do, that my remarks will not be too lengthy. Since that is a purely relative matter, let me, without further commitment, move on to a conviction which is slightly more substantive. It is, simply put, that everyone in this room is for pluralism in higher education and the freedom to choose. But, and this is my conviction number three, few if any of us has ever been challenged to examine the implications of these concepts.

Well, your program chairman has challenged me, and I accept the challenge. On the other hand, inasmuch as we don't have the rest of the day for the purpose, the best I can promise is a highly eclectic approach to a very complex set of issues -- issues which have achieved most of the sacredness of motherhood without necessarily the same degree of inevitability.

I once read that Sir Max Beerbohm, the English essayist and caricaturist, opened a radio broadcast by warning his audience about what was to follow. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I am afraid my subject is rather an exciting one and as I don't like excitement, I shall approach it in a gentle, timid, roundabout way." I intend to observe similar amenities, and if you don't believe me, just stick around.

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One of the first questions I had to ask myself as I finally settled down to address our theme is whether there is an inevitable relationship between pluralism and the freedom to choose, particularly vis à vis higher education. Well, it should surprise no one when I say that I could find no way, at least in my limited logic, where the luxury of pluralism could be justified unless there were also freedom of choice. If we had only one college or university in this country, then clearly the only choice would be between attending or not attending. Life for a great many people would be a lot simpler if this were indeed the case, and maybe, just maybe, we'd be no worse off. But I'll come back to that. It might be worth noting, nevertheless, that diversity (the quintessence of pluralism) in higher education is not something guaranteed by the Constitution. Although we now accept as an important tradition the existence of a wide variety of institutional opportunities, this tradition was fairly slow in evolving. I can remember (from reading, of course, and not because I was there) the revolutionary manifesto drawn in 1832 by the founders of New York University which declared that the time had come for some sort of advanced educational opportunity to be made available to sons and daughters of tradesmen and the like. Prior to that time higher education in America tended to be classical, elitist, and confined pretty much to meeting a quite limited number of professional needs. The Morrill Act of 1862 represented a major shift in that policy, calling as it did for the teaching of "such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts." And yet I believe it correct to say that the relatively "elitist" notion continued to dominate the higher education scene until the close of World War II and the adoption of the G.I. Bill of Rights. We may now, finally, be at the point of declaring attendance at an institution of higher education

a right and not just a privilege. For example, the legislation setting up the B.O.G. program uses the term "entitlement." Thus in higher education, although pluralism as such enjoys no constitutional guarantee, some form of pluralism will virtually be mandated as we acknowledge our obligation to accommodate enormously differing individual needs, needs that can clearly be met only by our providing widely varying kinds of academic opportunities.

Does the existence, though, of a pluralistic system absolutely mandate the maintenance of complete freedom of choice? Obviously, the answer is no. I hear increasing concern, for example, over the fact that we may already be turning out entirely too many college graduates for the market to absorb at their level of competence, a concern which I certainly share. For example, my congressman neighbor's son, a June Yale graduate, is a construction worker in the never-to-be-completed Washington subway.

One solution seriously proposed in some high places is that we make a continuing and careful prognostication of the future job market and then institute limitations on the freedom to choose. We may well have arrived at the stage where we believe, as a matter of national policy, that no one should be denied the opportunity for higher education; but there is doubt in many quarters that we can much longer afford a totally free market. This change of thinking may be implicit, for example, in the sharp drop in tax supported fellowships for many types of graduate and professional training -- which certainly limits the freedom of choice for some.

Furthermore, the complete freedom to choose on the part of the individual may long have been more apparent than real. For many years our private, and even a substantial number of public, institutions have chosen their students, rather than strictly the other way around.

Even today I am aware of practically no independent college which admits to a policy of open admissions, though some are quite close to practicing it.[1] Thus we might question whether the individual really has the range of option implicit in our title. And lest you think I am merely nit picking, let me merely say here that I will presently be noting some of the other factors that are increasingly limiting the breadth of options and thus setting some bounds to freedom of choice.

Underlying this whole issue is the question of who benefits from pluralism -- whether it is society at large or primarily the individual. And I suppose it is equally valid to ask who benefits from the maintenance of the right to freedom of choice. Our present administration in Washington almost from the moment it assumed power took the approach that the individual was the prime beneficiary and that thus the individual should bear the cost. Most of us in higher education, however, feel that society benefits more than the individual. Thus we have sought to provide a wide range of institutional options in the conviction that this is the most efficient way of preserving and ultimately utilizing the nation's vital human resources.

I think we might well rephrase my last two questions and ask what we would lose if we yielded both pluralism and the freedom to choose. Certainly one of the first things is that a lot of college and university presidents would be out of their jobs! But they are accustomed to this prospect and accept it as a kind of occupational hazard. A lot of faculty members, too, would find themselves in serious need of retreading; but latest market reports suggest that this is going on even under a pluralistic system. As for the

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[1] A current ACE study indicates that about 65% of the institutions have some form of "open admissions."

student and his freedom to choose, many of us in secret moments wish we had the power to tell some of our students and prospective students where they can go (interpret that as you will).

Taking a more serious approach, if the individual could really no longer choose which college, university, or postsecondary school to attend, or even which field of concentration to pursue, there would presumably still remain a vast number of other areas where he could exercise freedom of choice. For example, he could still elect whether to drive a Pinto or a Mercedes, a choice which, as with higher education, will presumably continue to be dominated to a major degree by financial status and personal priorities. Nevertheless, I hold college choice on a considerably higher level in the scale of freedoms. Already in our collective society we have had to make a tremendous number of concessions to preserve the common weal. But possibly because I am dedicated to the importance of higher education, I would maintain that losing this choice would represent a serious malfunction in the basic machinery of individual liberty. Thus by any abrogation of freedom of choice in higher education we would <u>all</u> have lost something extremely important. Our well vaunted "land of liberty" would find its lustre seriously tarnished.

In fact, I think we must agree that there are really very few viable alternatives to pluralism, and that since freedom to choose is the rationale for pluralism, these two principles must be preserved in tandem and virtually at all costs. Now, some of you may have noted that to this point I have tended to fall in the not uncommon trap, in discussing our subject, of seeming to confuse freedom of choice of institutional type with freedom to choose a particular field of study. Well, mea culpa. But let me say here what I should have said earlier, which is that when I talk hereafter about pluralism I am referring to public/private, large/small, coeducational/single-sex, predominantly white/predominantly black, church related/nonsectarian, two year/four year/graduate/professional, even proprietary as against non-proprietary. In other words, the whole schmoo. Furthermore, when I use the word

"college" I refer to the two, three, four, and five year college indiscriminately.

I am willing to accept that all of these institutional types are important and that they deserve to be maintained until such time as any one of them, as individual units or as categories, may cease to meet the needs of a large enough group of clients to render them any longer viable. Whether we ask it or not, the market place will continue testing which, if any, are dispensable. Moreover, it is not improper that we who espouse one type of institution against another should be called on to provide the hard answers and to participate energetically in the function of convincing.

We must come now to the real complexities of our topic, and I am less than hopeful that I can even phrase the issues properly. And so, somewhat out of my own perplexity, let me jump right into the muddle by declaring that freedom of choice can be best protected by providing really meaningful alternatives. In other words, a genuine difference must exist among the options. Further, somehow or other we must achieve measurable differences in outcomes.

There is some evidence that it may not really matter where a student attends college. Our first suspicion of this came a decade or so ago with the publication of a study entitled They Went To College, in which a vast majority of alumni included in a national survey, despite the fact that they attended the widest possible range of institutions, declared that they would make the same choice if they had to do it over again.

Since I personally would not necessarily make the same choice if, perish the thought, I miraculously were 15 again, I have no ready

explanation for this phenomenon. Presumably our individual institutions do a better sales job than I think they do. Or it could be that subconsciously we know we will never be required to make the choice again and thus find it simpler to be content than discontent with earlier indiscretions. More likely what is operative in this context is something that I believe psychologists call "cognative dissonance." For the few of you who may not be familiar with this syndrome, it is merely this: If there are two or more almost identical applies placed on the tray and we are obliged to choose one or the other of them, our mind will almost immediately, after the choice has been made, begin rationalizing why our selection was the right one. Our egos will simply not let us admit even to ourselves that we could be wrong.

(Incidentally, this very process is not without its hazards. You may recall the story of the chap whose mother-in-law gave him two neckties for his birthday. When the good lady arrived for her next visit, diplomat that he was, he anticipated her by wearing one of the ties. Whereupon, taking one look at him, she said a little peevishly, "Oh, so you don't like that other tie I gave you!")

Back to our subject -- the problems of choice, implying as they do some kind of differential, are further complicated by a number of recent studies (notably those by Dr. Astin) which suggest, in terms of institutional impact on the individual, that there is little or no difference among institutions. The student might go to Harvard, Hamilton, Hofstra, Brown, Boston, or Beaver, and he will be neither better educated nor worse by virtue of his choice of one over the other. Commenting on this rather depressing hypothesis Edward J. Shoben, Jr., in a recent article entitled "Pluralism and Academic Standards: A Problem in Values," wrote:

> In literally 49 out of 50 studies, the correlation of undergraduate grades to indices of postgraduate success is insignificant. The same outcome seems to occur regardless of the criterion of extracollegiate achievement -- amount of earned income, listing in directories of the eminent like Who's Who or American Men of Science, ratings by supervisors of teaching performance in public schools, evaluations by corporations of junior executives, number or judged impact of published works, rate and level of promotion in business or governmental organizations, etc.[2]

Now, I personally hope that these studies are wrong, if for no other reason, because the implications of their possible rightness are so distressing. To suggest one or two obvious implications, if there is really no particular difference in outcome between one institution and another, then our whole system of voluntary accreditation, which we have taken so seriously over the years, may be something of a charade. Further, we are coming to realize that even the degree as such may not have the benefits, measured in earned income, which are claimed for it in so much promotional literature. At a time when relatively few could enjoy the opportunities of college attendance, there was undoubtedly a significant difference in life-time earnings, and we can scarcely be faulted at our uncritical acceptance of the nation that the education itself is what made the difference. Now we are not so sure, and I suppose we can't be until Howard University completes, under a Ford grant, its analysis of the very complex set of variables involved in this context.

There is still another set of studies which, from a different approach, tends to suggest that variations among institutions may be lessening to the place where, academically at least, their performance ratings are moving toward a common denominator. Traditionally, of course, Harvard University has been the pace setter or bellwether, a fact which I as a Yale man may

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[2]Edward J. Shoben, "Pluralism and Academic Standards: A Problem in Values," Address to American Association for Higher Education, March 14, 1973, p. 7.

deplore but must accept. The famous "Red Book," or Harvard study on general education, virtually revolutionized the nation's undergraduate curricula. (Ironically, Harvard itself implemented only a few of its own committee's recommendations!)

I suppose, really, we have always known that the very nature of our educational ethos provides a kind of vertical aspiration: the junior college wants to become a four-year college, four-year colleges want to be small universities, small universities want to be major graduate universities, and, perish the thought, Yales may even want to be Harvards. But the degree of homogenization taking place in recent years has been sharply brought to our attention by both the Newman task force and by the distinguished Carnegie Commission, each of which rightly views with alarm. For if indeed we wish to claim a pluralistic system based on the principle of diversity and providing meaningful choices for the individual, then we must subjugate the impulse of emulation to that of independent creativity.

If in fact our alumni would for the most part choose the same institution again, regardless of what it is and what it does and where it and they are going; if in fact it can be demonstrated that outcomes bear but minimal relationship to institutional differences and that the individual can serve his own needs in an almost infinite variety of academic settings; if in fact we are dominated by an innate tendency toward institutional conformity, then we should probably resign ourselves to the establishment of a national ministry of education, subordinate all of our schools, colleges, and universities to its tender care, and for the most part require the student to attend, not the institution of his choice,

but the one nearest to his home, pad, commune, what have you.

But I must come back to the assertion that, if we are to preserve pluralism and the freedom to choose, those of us who are the functionaries of a pluralistic system have a profound obligation to maintain genuine institutional differences, to examine critically our standards and procedures toward the end of ensuring measurably variable outcomes.

A serious barrier to freedom of choice, of course, is the financial, and here's where the public/private issue achieves its peak of highest intensity. In general, despite the sympathetic understanding of a great many leaders in Congress, we have had a real fight to try to provide the kinds of educational assistance which will reduce the severe cost gap between public and private. Please note that I have used the word reduce rather than eliminate. I have no objection to a public policy which provides a differential in the cost of attending tax supported as against independent institutions. What I do object to is the present disparity which is so great as either to eliminate any true choice on the part of the middle income student or to force the institution into a disproportionate allocation of its own resources in order to meet the student's financial needs.

What we are up against here, of course, is an enormous social as well as fiscal problem. Perhaps as much because the public exchequer is not unlimited as because the potential degree of public indifference is, higher education has lost its favored position on the ladder of national priorities. And so far as the theme of this discussion is concerned, we have consequently moved dangerously close to the economic position where choice of college is perhaps being made not so much by

the individual as for him.

I am not so much trying to be disheartening as realistic. Just being in favor of pluralism in higher education and the freedom to choose is not the same as guaranteeing their existence. Particularly if we are thinking of pluralism in the more narrow perspective of public versus private, we must become concerned not just with the how but with the who as well.

Independent higher education does indeed need to develop its case. We can no longer t ke for granted an enlightened and sympathetic constituency of adequate proportions. When the humorist Al Capp was on the Queens University campus recently taking part in a debate with students and was challenged to answer a particularly searching question, he replied, "I am no longer young enough to know everything." And that is pretty much how I feel as I move into this, the final portion of my remarks to you today.

Let me start by saying that I am pretty sure what cannot be included in the case for private higher education, even though we have been doing so, literally, for generations.

I can readily agree with Clark Kerr when he declares that "the segment of higher education which has provided the greatest source of diversity, has shown the greatest attention to the individual student, has undertaken the most innovation, has helped preserve autonomy for us all, is now the most threatened -- and that is the private sector."[3] But you will note that he has used the past tense in this affirmation. He has not said that the private sector is now superior to the public in all of these aspects or that it will be so in the days ahead.

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[3] "Higher Education in the 1980s and the Role of the Private Institution," an unpublished address at Claremont Colleges, March 18, 1972.

We cannot claim that the private colleges have better facilities than the public, for on average this is simply not the case. We cannot claim that the private colleges have superior faculties to the public; for again, on average, the exceptions weaken the argument. We cannot claim that the private sector has a student body superior to the public. To my sure knowledge, in one leading state recently the entering scores of freshmen at the state's tax supported institution exceeded by a noticeable margin those in the state's many and quite distinguished private colleges. We cannot even claim that the private colleges and universities are more innovative than the public, for some of our most innovative programs are to be found in places like Old Westbury, Evergreen State, Minnesota Metropolitan, and the like. And I could go on; but since I am sure that no one here wants me to drag this out, any more than I want to myself, let me look hopefully at the other side of the coin.

Despite these oft-claimed differences which cannot really be substantiated, there are many and very important reasons why society, even through its various governmental units, should continue to support private higher education. Again turning to Clark Kerr (who is beginning to be about as widely quoted as Cardinal Newman in his time and Alfred North Whitehead in his), the graduate of the private college serves society just as well as the graduate of the public college and thus, in principle, public financial support should be equally available to both kinds of institutions.[4] Furthermore, it generally costs the taxpayers less for a student to be educated in a private rather than in a public college. The

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[4] Loc. cit.

demise of the private sector would result in an enormous burden upon the public exchequer.

But these are negative rationalizations. There is a positive and fundamental difference between the independent college and the tax supported college, a difference which may be as vitally important to the one as to the other. I refer to the simple and rather elemental fact that the ultimate distinction between the two lies in the degree of control, as well as the direction of control, over internal governance which can be imposed by external forces and agencies.

I would not for a moment claim that the private college is independent in the full sense of the word. In New York State, for example, the Regents exercise considerable authority over the curricular offerings and even the degree nomenclature available to the state's supposedly independent colleges and universities. Furthermore, certain court decisions, state and federal, tend to affect both public and private without discrimination. But there is a difference. And the difference is that the independent institution has a self-perpetuating board which exercises, even though perhaps by delegation, extensive authority in selecting and supporting the leadership of the institution. This has a profound impact on the freedom of the president to administer, on the freedom of the faculty to teach, on the freedom of the student to choose, on the whole range of self determinations which are so vital to institutional integrity. Thus, the independent college, significantly more than the public, can determine its own objectives and goals and focus on values discretely its own. And even though the difference in the way such freedoms are exercised in many private and in many public institutions may

be more in the area of theory than in practice, the difference is nevertheless essential and, I might add, must be held sacrosanct. Further, of all of the elements that make up the pluralism in American higher education, this is the most elemental.

I implied a moment ago that this difference is as important to the tax supported institution as to the private, an assertion which perhaps needs no elaboration but let me at least risk a brief one. As president of a state university for five years, I am acutely aware of the power which legislators and governors, state directors of finance and commissioners of education can exercise over the individual academic unit. There were moments when I wondered not only if I could call my soul my own but whether I even had one. But in the long run there was always an essential safeguard -- a kind of "fleet in being," to borrow a concept from naval strategy. This was simply the existence in that same state of a substantial number of strong, highly visible, intelligently led, independent colleges and universities. When the chips were down, they were ready to come to our defense. Fortunately they rarely had to, but their very presence exercised a potential restraint upon those who wished, for whatever reason, to deprive the tax supported institutions of the basic elements of freedom and autonomy without which an academic institution is no longer viable.

And so it is essential to all types of academic institutions, to all those individuals who believe in maintaining freedom of choice in higher education, that we preserve a vigorous system of independent higher education. Without it, pluralism in any true sense is impossible, and without

pluralism in higher education, freedom of choice is merely a hollow shibboleth. For, as William Temple said, "It is in and through his freedom that a man makes fully real his personality -- the quality of one made in the image of God."